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LIDDELL HART, KENNAN, AND THE END OF THE COLD WAR

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Committee 5
9 October 1990

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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
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1. REPORT DATE 09 OCT 1990		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Liddell Hart, Kennan, and the End of the Cold War				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

With your knowledge, brains, and command of the pen, you could have written just as commanding a book called the Strategy of the Direct Approach.

Field Marshal Earl Wavell to
B.H. Liddell Hart, 1942

For all intents and purposes, the Cold War is over. Never before in history had two antagonistic systems attempted to subvert and subdue one another for so long--45 years--without engaging in direct combat. There is no doubt, however, which side prevailed. The "inherent contradictions" that Marx and Lenin saw in capitalism turned out to be misplaced. George Kennan was remarkably prescient in his famous 1947 "X" article when he wrote that "Soviet power, like that of the capitalist world of its conception, bears within it the seeds of its own decay...." The communist system, built on presumably unshakable bedrock, turned out to be a house of cards.

The question that will occupy strategists for years to come is, why did the house collapse? The poles of the debate have already been staked out by the triumphalists (we won the Cold War, primarily due to Reagan's policies) and the sore winners (we overreacted/the Russians never were coming/communism was a flawed system that basically imploded). Might there be a middle-ground explanation postulating a favorable strategic outcome for the West based on the measured application of a variety of actions short of war? Was Kennan's theory of containment--the West's clarion call to action against Stalin's USSR--that explanation? The answer: sort of. Was containment, either as formulated by Kennan or practiced by eight U.S. presidents, the natural offspring of Liddell Hart's theory of the indirect approach developed over 60 years ago? Again, the answer is, sort of. Let me explain.

There is no indication that Liddell Hart had any influence on the development of post-war Western policies toward the USSR or on Kennan. The two men never met, and the only time Liddell Hart mentioned Kennan--in a 1960 book--was in passing reference to nuclear weapon free zones in Europe. His three major books after the war on military affairs (Defense of the West, The Revolution in Warfare, and Deterrent or Defense) showed an appreciation of Soviet military prowess combined with a surprisingly benign view of the Soviet system, its goals, and the threat it posed--the same mistake he made regarding Nazi Germany. The books barely mentioned the indirect approach. Most of Liddell Hart's energies between 1940 (when his memoirs stop) and his death in 1970 were spent salvaging a reputation damaged as a result of his Chamberlain-like views of Hitler rather than applying the indirect approach to Western strategy toward the USSR.

Liddell Hart revised his indirect approach theory so much between 1928 and 1940 that it became, according to one analyst of his work, "such a loosely defined and flexible concept that it could be used to suit almost any purpose" (Mearsheimer, p.215). Liddell Hart, who fought at the Somme and saw his battalion destroyed, was horrified at the prospect of British troops being committed to another "meat grinder" land war in Europe. Despite his groundbreaking work in the mid-1920s on maneuver warfare with armored forces, he viewed the UK's World War I commitment as an historical aberration that should never be repeated. The indirect approach was based on the notion that warfare should be conducted by avoiding fruitless frontal assaults--he was slowly coming to believe in the inherent advantage of the defense after analyzing four years of trench deadlock--and instead finding an enemy's Achilles' heel and rapidly

striking at it. That heel could be the civilian population, the economy, colonies, transportation networks, or ideology, among others. In the military realm, he moved over a decade from favoring fast-moving mechanized forces, to airpower, to the use of non-lethal gas against civilians, to naval stranglehold as the best way to implement the indirect approach. He became fond of the "Sherman model" (both Sherman's Western campaign and his march to the sea) as the 19th century exemplar of the wartime use of the indirect approach: strike into the rear, use mobility and surprise, demoralize the population, avoid head-on battles if possible, and keep your opponent guessing as to your ultimate objective. Liddell Hart's aim: throw the enemy off balance and weaken his resistance through flexibility, deception, propaganda, blockade, or whatever means suited the task. Only then should a direct blow be administered--if needed at all. Despite his admiration for Sherman, he later abandoned even that model because its application required attrition warfare to precede it.

The theory of the indirect approach mandated the harmonious application of military and non-military means. Where Liddell Hart came up short in the years covering the Italian attack on Abyssinia, the Munich sellout of Czechoslovakia, and the fall of France was his continued belief in the utility of collective security through primarily non-military means. His staunch belief in the superiority of the defense prevented him from advocating a military buildup to confront the Nazis. He betrayed his own theory, which allowed for negotiated settlements, because he ignored the indirect quasi-military offensive actions he had developed that could weaken an adversary's will before the settlement. These included the "baited gambit," presenting the enemy a military dilemma, and force

dislocation through maneuver. In a twist of fate, General Heinz Guderian specifically credited Liddell Hart's earlier writings with helping the German General Staff operationalize the blitzkrieg concept.

There are some kernels of Liddell Hart's indirect approach in the concept of containment and its application. Kennan's seminal "X" article was a lucid analysis of the defects and dangers of the Soviet system, presented a policy prescription that was right for the times, and still holds some lessons for today. Kennan believed the Soviet system was basically not fixable. He foresaw the Brezhnev era--stagnation at home, expansion abroad--when he observed that human institutions often show the greatest outward brilliance at the moment when inner decay is most advanced. His call for a "long-term, patient, but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansionist tendencies..." with the "...application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers in Soviet policy" struck the right chord in the West.

Kennan saw the US as having the power to increase enormously the strains on the Soviet system. Containment was not an end in itself, but should "water the seeds of internal disintegration and promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or gradual mellowing of Soviet power." There is much of Liddell Hart in this approach, but there are also at least two major differences. First, containment as postulated and practiced was more defensive and reactive than the indirect approach when properly applied. Second, by giving up the initiative, the West allowed the Soviets largely free rein to pick the time, place, and manner of the next confrontation, forcing the West to

resort to a series of blocking maneuvers. In fact, Moscow often did a better job of applying the indirect approach's tenets of compelling a change of front, advancing in a strategic net, and threatening alternate objectives. Because of its inconsistent application over the decades, the containment policy only did part of the job its author intended: it kept the beast in its cage, but neither killed nor tamed it.

In his memoirs, Kennan later compared the application of his containment concept to that of "inadvertently loosening a large boulder from the top of a cliff and helplessly witnessing the path of destruction in the valley below..." (p. 375). In my judgement, Kennan overreacted to subsequent events and policies, placing himself at the center of a long-running debate over the balance between carrots and sticks in Western policy toward the USSR. However, Kennan thought the West could bring the USSR to heel in 10 to 15 years. Instead, it was US consensus about containing the USSR that disintegrated within two decades on the shoals of the Vietnam war. Even before Vietnam, containment and many of its indirect approach tenets were haphazardly applied at best, with each successive US administration attempting to discredit policies of the previous one. The Marshall Plan was a good example of the indirect approach, but the massive retaliation policy was not because it removed all flexibility in dealing with an enemy. Dulles' rollback policy would fit the indirect approach if it had been applied using a variety of instruments; however, the lack of Western response to the Hungarian revolution showed it to be stillborn. The doctrine of flexible response, foreign broadcasting, economic aid, the belt of alliances around the USSR, covert action, the Nixon trip to China, and some arms control negotiation exemplified the indirect approach, but US involvement in Vietnam did not.

Detente as practiced in the 1970s was really a successful Soviet application of the indirect approach against the West; however, detente since the mid-80s reversed the roles. The use of surrogates fits well into the indirect approach: The Soviets practiced it against the US in Vietnam, while the US did so later against the USSR by supporting the Afghan mujahideen.

Did containment and its indirect approach aspects, despite fits and starts, work? Yes. It prevented the USSR from flowing into major power vacuums in Europe and Asia (China temporarily excepted) after World War II. While it did not stop the USSR from selectively projecting its power and influence abroad, the resulting "socialist commonwealth of nations" was so diverse and unstable as to be immune to guidance from Moscow over the long term. As Gaddis has noted, it certainly lowered the Kremlin's propensity to take risks (p. 727).

Did the indirect approach push the USSR over the edge? No doubt it helped water the seeds of disintegration Kennan saw embedded in the system, but in many ways the USSR was an accident waiting to happen--especially ethnically and economically--that defied the odds for 70 years. Liddell Hart, or Kennan for the matter, never anticipated seeing their theories applied and misapplied over such a long period of what Hugh Seton-Watson called "neither war nor peace." Both superpowers practiced parts of the indirect approach in pursuit of their respective strategies. By thwarting Moscow's expansionist tendencies and thus helping to exacerbate domestic discontent, the West was able to stress the seams of the Soviet empire. The Cold War is over, but not yet won until the transformation of the Soviet Union is complete.

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